

## **Creating a Lifestory Book**

### **Introduction**

Thank you for your commitment to create Lifestory Books for the children on your caseload. In accordance with Children's Administration Policy, children who are adopted will have a Lifestory Book. We are confident that this manual will assist you in this process. The time and effort you put into the Lifestory Book will be well served. Children who are going through the adoption process need to have a sense of where they came from in order to go somewhere. This Lifestory Book will be their link to the past as they move into their future.

### **Overview of Task: Purpose of Lifestory Book**

A child's Lifestory Book has several purposes. It is primarily a bridge to a child's past. It is a way to preserve their history, to help them gain an understanding about what happened in their early years. It also helps them come to understand that what happened was not their fault; was beyond their ability to change or influence.

While their stories may sometimes be painful, they are their own and we do not have the right to tamper with the facts or take them from the children. Many of these children would not be able to recall all the people and places that were important in their lives without a Lifestory Book. Even those who are older when they enter "the system" lose much of what they are able to remember because they are so focused on surviving the moment.















This manual is organized into three main sections. They are, (1) Tools for getting Started, (2) The Manuscript, and (3) the Workbook. The Workbook has preformatted

pages for the Lifestory Book. It has been designed so that the pages can be placed in a three-ring binder. There is a cover page to place in the front of the binder.

## **I. TOOLS FOR GETTING STARTED**

### **Reviewing the Files**

To compile the child's past history, the best and most complete source of information will be the Department of Social and Health Services, Division of Children and Family Services case file. You will need to read and sort through the files to find the information you will need for the Lifestory Book. Items to look for include:

-  Case records for child
-  Reports from other agencies
  -  Treatment
  -  Evaluations
  -  Progress reports
-  Information on birth parents and siblings
-  Child's Medical and Family Background Reports
-  Information on foster families
-  Information on relatives
-  Social worker observations
-  Birth records
-  School records and pictures
-  Court records
-  Law enforcement contacts with family
-  Native American status
-  Placement history

## **Talking to Previous Social Workers**

If you have not been the social worker for this child for a long period of time, previous workers can provide you with a great deal of information on the history of the child. These workers will have first hand knowledge of the birth parents, relatives, and foster parents.

## **Talking with Birth/Foster Families**

A child's birth parents, other relatives, and previous foster families are also good sources of information. Discussion with them about this child should occur only if they have given approval (agreed) to discuss this child. If you have not been the social worker for this child for a long period of time, check with the previous social worker before contacting birth and foster parents. There may be things you should know before you contact a family. Some questions you may want to ask are:

### **Birth Parents**

- ☞ What can you tell me about your family? Do you have any siblings? What can you tell me about them?
- ☞ Would you like to write a letter to include in the book?
- ☞ What hobbies, do you and your family members have? (Music, art, crafts,)
- ☞ How far did your family members get in school?
- ☞ Did any of your family members have a learning disability?
- ☞ Can you describe the child's birth?
  - How long was labor?
  - Was it difficult?
  - Was it easy?
  - How long in the hospital?
  - Who visited baby?
  - How did the child get its name?
  - Did the baby cry a lot, sleep a lot?
- ☞ When did s/he start to crawl?
  - Walk?
  - Talk?
  - Rollover?
  - Start teething? (How was this experience?)
  - When did s/he sleep through the night for the first time?

- 👤 Are there any stories you would like to share with your child?
- 👤 What would you like to share with your child about you?
- 👤 Did s/he have a favorite toy?
- 👤 A favorite blanket?
- 👤 Were there any family pets? If so, what and what were the names?
- 👤 Can you describe a fun time? A special event?

### Foster Parents/Relatives

- ☎ When did the child come to live with you?
- ☎ How did s/he adjust?
- ☎ How did s/he get your attention?
- ☎ What were the objects that were most important to him/her?
- ☎ What did s/he like to do (games, school activities/subjects?
- ☎ Other than you, who were the important people to him/her?
  - Other adults?
  - Children?
- ☎ What talents did s/he display?
- ☎ What were his/her favorite foods?
- ☎ What illnesses did s/he have?
- ☎ In general, what was the child's disposition?

### Child

Including the child in the development of the life book is also another option and one that is encouraged. Children will remember things that are important to them that may not be in the file or recalled by birth parents or foster parents. Including the child will provide you with a different perspective and will add to the work you do and will give the child an opportunity to pieces of their life in the book themselves.

If you want to include the full names of birth parents and/or previous foster families in the Lifestory Book, you will need to send them a Release of Information Form. This allows them to indicate whether or not they wish their names to appear in the Lifestory Book. A sample Release of Information Form, along with a cover letter that you could use, is at the end of this section.

### **Where to Begin?**

For each child, there will be good times and bad times that will need to be included in the Lifestory Book. While some of these events may be painful, it is important to

reflect the reality of the child's experience. The difficulty is balancing the hard reality with positive messages about the child's past. It is important that the Lifestory Book include both, to help the child come to understand his/her life now and how it fits with the future.

## **Dealing with Difficult Issues**

As you know, many foster children have already had to face some difficult issues in their lives. Birth parents may have a different view on an issue. You may want to provide the birth parents perspective as well as your perspective. This will allow the child to see that the department's view is not the only view and give them an opportunity to develop their own assessment of the situation. The manuscript in Section Two provides suggested scenarios on how to address a particular topic. In most cases, based on the information you have gathered, all you may need to do is "fill in the blanks". These topics are grouped into several different categories, such as:

- Reason's children may be separated from their birth parents and placed in foster care:
  - Mental illness
  - Sexual abuse
  - Physical abuse
  - Neglect
  - Drug/alcohol abuse
  - Drug-affected baby
  - Suicide
  - Law breaking
- Other Out of Home Placements
  - Multiple foster home placements
  - Residential Treatment Care
- Court/social service agency actions
  - Foster care
  - Termination of parental rights
  - Voluntary relinquishment
  - It's not your fault

- The Adoption Process
  - Foster or adoptive placement didn't work out
  - Adoptive family changes mind
  - Failed adoption
  - Separated siblings
- Child's Feelings
  - Right to one's feelings
  - Sadness/depression
  - Missing birth parents

### **Creating the Lifestory Book**

Now that you have reviewed the case file(s), spoken with previous social worker(s), and interviewed the families of the child. You are now ready to put all the information in order and actually begin to write the text and think about the graphic elements that will make the child's Lifestory Book unique and special.

Many have found it helpful to put the facts of the child's life in chronological order, beginning with the child's birth and moving on from there.

### **Adding Pictures to Tell the Story**

"A picture is worth a thousand words . . ." Beyond organizing the information and finding ways to deal with difficult subjects, you may also want to add pictures and graphics to tell the child's Lifestory. Things that might come in handy for the "artistic" side of this Lifestory Book are:

- ✂ Book of Baby Names
- ✂ Release of Information Form/s
- ✂ Design Shapes (pre-cut)
- ✂ Lay-out Idea Booklets
- ✂ Colored Mounting Paper

- ✂ Page Protectors
- ✂ Pens (calligraphy and fine tip)
- ✂ Photo Slits & Runners (for mounting)
- ✂ Glue Stick
- ✂ Corner Rounding Tool
- ✂ Scissors (designed edges)
- ✂ Scissors (straight edges)
- ✂ Stencils (large shapes)
- ✂ Stencils (small shapes)
- ✂ Stickers (large)
- ✂ Stickers (small)
- ✂ Stickers (seasonal & occasion)

## **Use of the Web**

You may find various web sites that could be helpful to you as you put this Lifestory Book together. Here are just a few:

American Psychiatric Association at: <http://www.psych.org/>

Scrap books website: <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Village/3771/>

<http://dir.lycos.com/Arts/Crafts/Scrapbooking/>

Child Welfare League of American (CWLA): <http://www.cwla.org>

North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC):

<http://www.nacac.org/>

## **Additional Information:**

### **Search**

Washington Adoption Rights Movement (WARM)

5960 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue S., Suite 107

Seattle, WA 98108

206-767-9510

American Adoption Congress

Cherokee Station

PO Box 20137

New York, NY 10028-0051  
212-988-0110

International Soundex Reunion Registry  
PO Box 2312  
Carson City, Nevada 89702

### **A Job Well Done**

Remember that this Lifestory Book is unique and special to each child. As you put the finishing touch on his/her book, try to match the personality of this child to their book. They may not thank you for your efforts at the time you present them the book, but they will come to appreciate your commitment to the process, as they grow older.